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GSA Assailed On Rules for Agency Sites

By Kirk Scharfenberg
Washington Post Staff Writer

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission has charged that proposed regulations governing the location of federal facilities "make it possible for officials to ignore" the availability of low- and moderate-income housing in selecting sites.

The commission in a letter to the General Services Administration, which issued the proposed regulations, said it believes the availability of housing "should be an absolute requirement" in selecting such sites.

The proposed regulations assert that the availability of housing is only one of several considerations in site selection. It appears to have a lower priority than the space needs of the agency involved.

The proposals, published in the Federal Register by GSA last month, are designed to implement an executive order last February by President Nixon on the location of federal agencies.

Final action on the regulations will come after public and private agencies have had time to comment on them, and after GSA studies these comments.

The proposed regulations also have drawn sharp criticism from a number of private civil rights groups and fair housing organizations.

Arthur F. Sampson, commissioner of the GSA's public building service, defended in an interview yesterday both the regulations and the GSA's

Fair housing and civil rights groups have criticized a number of federal moves to the Washington suburbs in the 1960s, charging that they discriminated against low-income black employees living in the District who could not buy housing in the suburbs and had no way of commuting there. Similar charges have been made in other cities.

Sampson said his agency had a firm commitment—in Washington and around the country—to locate federal facilities so they are accessible to low- and middle-income employees.

However, he said the GSA could not be tied down to specific definitions and criteria in locating federal agencies and must select sites "on a case-by-case basis."

Regulations state that the GSA will consider the availability of housing on nondiscriminatory basis only for federal employees when selecting building locations.

The Civil Rights Commission charged in its letter that limiting consideration of open housing only to the needs of federal employees was a violation of the 1968 Civil Rights Act that requires federal agencies to take "affirmative action" to assure fair housing for all.

Sampson said GSA's responsibility is limited solely to federal employees and added the Department of Housing and Urban Development is charged with implementing the broader program.

The Civil Rights Commission, in a letter signed by acting director John A. Buggs, said the GSA's position "would constitute tacit acceptance by GSA of the existence of 'unfair housing' for nonfederal employees who are minority citizens."